
This is another excellent addition to the Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy series. The chosen authors range from Gorgias (probably 5th century BC) to Proclus (5th century AD), and conclude with the anonymous Prologomena to the Philosophy of Plato (6th century AD). The texts include not only well-known passages from Plato and Aristotle but also extracts from important thinkers—Cicero, Augustine, Proclus—who do not feature as often as they should in the historical surveys and discussions of aesthetics that are usual in anglophone philosophy.

The extracts from Plato are voluminous (a quarter of the total text) and well-chosen. It is of course a pity that, as always in a book of this kind, the Symposium cannot be reprinted in its totality, as it is not easily encapsulated in a mere extract. But the short extract that is given here, 206a-212a, does capture its essence as well as can be hoped for, and complements the other Platonic passages effectively. Another short passage, from the Sophist, dealing with visual representation, is followed by a similar passage from Xenophon. In fact the choice and sequence of Plato extracts, from seven of his works, followed immediately by Xenophon, succeeds in conveying Plato’s aesthetics with unusual cohesion and clarity. The choice of passages from Aristotle’s Poetics, followed by the Politics 7.1341b-1342a, is equally apposite and clear.

An author who until now has rarely appeared in the history of aesthetics is Philodemus—an Epicurean contemporary of Cicero—part of whose work on poetry and music has been retrieved, more recently with the help of multi-spectral imaging, from a buried library in Herculaneum. Philodemus distinguished between being technically proficient as a versifier and being a good poet, and like a good Epicurean he believed that the value of music is that it gives us pleasure; it is not, he argued, a symbolic language of the emotions, still less a mode of understanding.

One of the great pleasures of this anthology is the space that it devotes to Cicero. Perhaps, as a consequence, he will not be neglected or ignored in future anglophone studies of aesthetics. Cicero introduced into Latin the term honestum as an equivalent for to kalon, and decorum as equivalent to to prepon, both terms which frequently occur in the passages given here. For Cicero, beauty of body and soul, and beauty in language and in art and craft, are similar throughout the universe, and testify to a governing intelligence. It is interesting to find the pagan Cicero using an argument from intelligent design to establish the existence of God; but in any case, it is clear that aesthetics is an area in which his well-trained and powerful philosophical mind can be seen to particular advantage.
In the period covered by this book, most philosophical thinking from the 3rd century onwards was influenced by Stoicism and Platonism. Seneca, good Stoic though he was, was happy to employ the Aristotelian concept of cause—or, to be precise his distinction of four kinds of cause—to help in explaining the nature of beauty. Longinus, a Platonist, wrote with extraordinary passion about beauty in literature, and it is evident that he regarded Plato as a literary genius who bears comparison with Homer and Hesiod. His concept of the sublime, which proved to be of such importance in the 18th century, is presented here in passages that are well-chosen and which use Russell and Winterbottom’s excellent Clarendon Press translation (1972).

Two authors called Philostratus—one from the 2nd century and one from the 3rd century AD—are distinguished by the editors as Philostratus and Philostratus the Younger. Both dealt with the visual arts, particularly painting, and both distinguished between the role played in painting by imitation and that played by imagination, a distinction clearly relevant in any discussion of Plato or Platonist aesthetics. Aristides Quintilianus, probably 3rd century AD, devoted himself in his On Music, Book 2, to the social and educational value of music. Music, he writes, is to the body as reason is to the soul, so that without both, operating in harmony together, human beings remain incomplete. Without music we “lapse into base and brutal passions”; with music we cultivate “noble impulses and most excellent deeds”.

The 3rd century also produced one of the most remarkable intellects of antiquity, Plotinus. Notoriously difficult to summarize, the passages printed here should give even undergraduates a flavour of an extraordinary intelligence at work. Plotinus is followed by Augustine, the only thinker here of equal rank with Plato and Aristotle—usually neglected in histories of aesthetics, or, even worse, considered to belong to the medieval rather than the classical world. Passages included here are taken from six of his many works. The passage from his De musica might be too technical and complex for some tastes, but the other passages describe in various ways a single experiential journey from the sensuous pleasures of art and beauty to an apprehension of the highest divine wisdom. It is a theory with a shape and character similar to Plato’s, but enriched by its invocation of the senses and its constant insistence on the importance of number in the universe.

Only two passages from Proclus are included, one from his Commentary on the Timaeus and one from his Commentary on the Republic, in the latter of which he writes that poetry is “a madness better than sanity”. The editors conclude with a passage from the Anonymous Prologomena to the Philosophy of Plato, which contains a defence of Plato’s use of characterisation and dialogue in his philosophical works.
The translations—mostly though not exclusively the work of the editors—are excellent, and a Note on texts and translations gives detailed information on the original Greek and Latin texts upon which the translations are based. There is a short but informative Introduction, a Note on unfamiliar terms, a Chronology of authors and related historical events, some pages of further reading, and an Index. It is hard to see how an anthology of this kind could have been bettered, and it must prove to be a standard textbook and reference work for many years to come.

Hugh Bredin

Queens’ University, Belfast

hugh.bredin@yahoo.co.uk